

**Soldiers** *Online*

**The International Special  
Training Center:**

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# Training



# Europe's Best

Story and Photos by  
Heike Hasenauer

**I**N a tiny village in the Danube Valley, nestled deep in the rolling hills near Pfullendorf, Germany, soldiers from special forces and long-range reconnaissance patrol units from nine nations undergo tough training that teaches them more than by-the-book combat skills.

Occasionally a student at the International Special Training Center wonders what in the world he's doing here.

One student's heartfelt letter, posted outside a classroom of the Combat Survival Course, testifies to that.

Nobody really knows how long it's been there, or what became of the young soldier who wrote it. But instructors said they sometimes witness a newly arrived student stopping to read the hand-written scrawl, cracking a disbelieving smile as though the guy who wrote it might have been nuts — even laughing good-naturedly at portions of it or mumbling empathetic words.

The letter is just there, it seems, to assure potential quitters, who have yet to experience the hell of surviving alone under some of the harshest winter



**(Main photo)** Students in ISTC's Advanced Patrol Course learn how to move out as a team to conduct raids and ambushes. **(Inset)** The three-week Sharpshooter's Course requires soldiers to move into an area, locate a target and carefully conceal themselves after firing on the target.

conditions, that when they feel their world may be caving in and they can't last one more day, it won't, and they can. Others have been wracked by similar feelings of fear and uncertainty and have survived, said ISTC's Survival Division officer in charge, a member of the Norwegian Army Special Operations Command.

"I live in a hole that I covered with branches," the distraught specialist wrote. "If I had military gear, it wouldn't be so bad. I actually live in a trash bag lined with burlap sacks. I don't even know why I'm here. God, the roster of attendees gets smaller every day.

"I can't recall loving or missing anyone as much as I do you," he went on. "Tears are freezing on my face..."

The young soldier had been in the midst of the four-day isolation phase of the center's three-week Combat Survival Course. It's a time when students must start their own fires, build shelters and make due with the little food they've been given. And they wear the self-made clothing and use the self-made equipment they fashioned during the first week of the course, from material

provided by the school and whatever else they can scrounge.

Besides winter clothing — from mittens and headgear to coats and footwear — the improvised equipment includes makeshift compasses made from things like tin cans and plasticware, magnets and sewing needles; spears made of whittled-down tree-limbs; and sleds and snowshoes made of pieces of leather, wood,

themselves, dog and tracker teams from other nations' special operations forces are used to pick up their trails and give chase.

The course is conducted only four times annually, during winter months, "when soldiers have to do more to survive," said the Survival Division OIC. "It's among the most difficult courses at the center. If a student quits, it's typically the isolation phase that's the breaking point.

"It's a period when they have time to sit in the woods and contemplate their lives," the OIC said. "Some focus on negative aspects, troubles at home, a sick child perhaps, and they decide they need to go home."

Students are by no means thrown into the wild unprepared, however. Before venturing out on their own, they receive lectures on catching and eating small animals and

fish, and identifying edible plants. Earlier they learn how to construct a working compass and make clothing to protect themselves from the elements.

The Norwegian officer also teaches students how to start a fire using tinder they carry with them.

"If they try to rub two sticks

(Continued on page 14.)



**American and European special forces soldiers attend ISTC to hone their combat and medical skills, and to increase their knowledge of foreign weapons and capabilities.**

shoelaces and cloth.

"It's four days of living on the land. Four days of being pursued by a 'hunter force,' over about 120 kilometers," said instructor SFC Christopher Ninkovich, a U.S. soldier who was previously assigned to the 5th Special Forces Group at Fort Campbell, Ky.

To test soldiers' ability to conceal

*To test soldiers' ability to conceal themselves, dog and tracker teams from other nations' special operations forces are used to pick up their trails and give chase.*

# The International Special Training Center



**An observer-controller tries to locate concealed students. In a real-life operation being located would lead to the soldiers' death or capture.**

**T**HE International Special Training Center located at the German army installation Generaloberst-von-Fritsch-Kaserne in Pfullendorf, Germany, was formerly known as the International Long-Range Reconnaissance Patrol School.

Operated by the British since 1979, it's been under U.S. control since December 2000, said LTC Edward McHale, commander of the center's International Wing. A German army officer is commandant of the center, which is co-located with Germany's long-range surveillance unit.

ISTC is unique in Europe in providing centralized, combined training for special operations forces, long-range reconnaissance patrols and similar units, said McHale.

Multinational operational experiences "have shown us that

knowing each other and understanding how our respective SF forces operate have been critical" in places like the Middle East and Balkans," McHale said. "Every soldier who comes here walks away with a demystification of what the other countries' SF forces are all about."

Instructors, who have years of on-the-ground experience and are among the best in the special operations community, deserve credit for that, McHale said.

"If you just use a book, everybody can be an instructor, but without personal experience, it's worthless," said instructor MSG Dennis Dolan, a former member of the U.S. 7th Special Operations Group, whose practical experience includes tours in El Salvador and Honduras. He also served in Operation Desert Storm, Bosnia and in Albania with Task Force Hawk.

Likewise, one of the Italian instructors served with his country's 9th Special Forces Regiment in northern Iraq and was the victim of a 1993 ambush in Somalia in which several members of his patrol were hit by snipers on the outskirts of Mogadishu.

Currently, soldiers from nine NATO-member nations attend training here to hone their patrolling and special combat skills, medical skills and knowledge of other armies' weapons and capabilities, McHale said. And other new NATO nations are looking into sending their soldiers.

The center offers 10 training courses, primarily for special forces soldiers on-site

and via mobile training teams. On average, it graduates 400 to 500 students annually, McHale said.

Courses include the Combat Survival Course, Combat Resistance Course (with Resistance to Interrogation), Patrol Commander Course, Advanced Patrol Course, Sharpshooter Course, Close Quarter Battle Course, Patrol Medical Course, Combat Arms Recognition Course, Specialist Recognition Course and the Operations Planning Course.

Anyone who attends a Patrol Division or Survival Division course must first complete a language test and run and swim tests, said the Norwegian captain in charge of the Survival Division.



**Lake Constance and the Swiss border are only about a 30-minute drive from ISTC's home in Pfullendorf.**

Students must complete a seven-kilometer run within 52 minutes, carrying a 44-pound rucksack, Dolan said. The 50-meter swim test, in BDUs, must be completed in two minutes.

A major proposed change at ISTC involves a new International Wing training concept that would introduce the International Readiness Training Rotation — "a smaller version of the Joint Readiness Training Center," school officials said.

Training in infiltration techniques would include the addition of waterborne exercises and aviation assets. Additionally, training would be geared more toward the particular needs of the sending country's soldiers. — Heike Hasenauer



**Camouflaged students move out quickly during a field exercise that gauges how much they've learned in ISTC's challenging courses.**



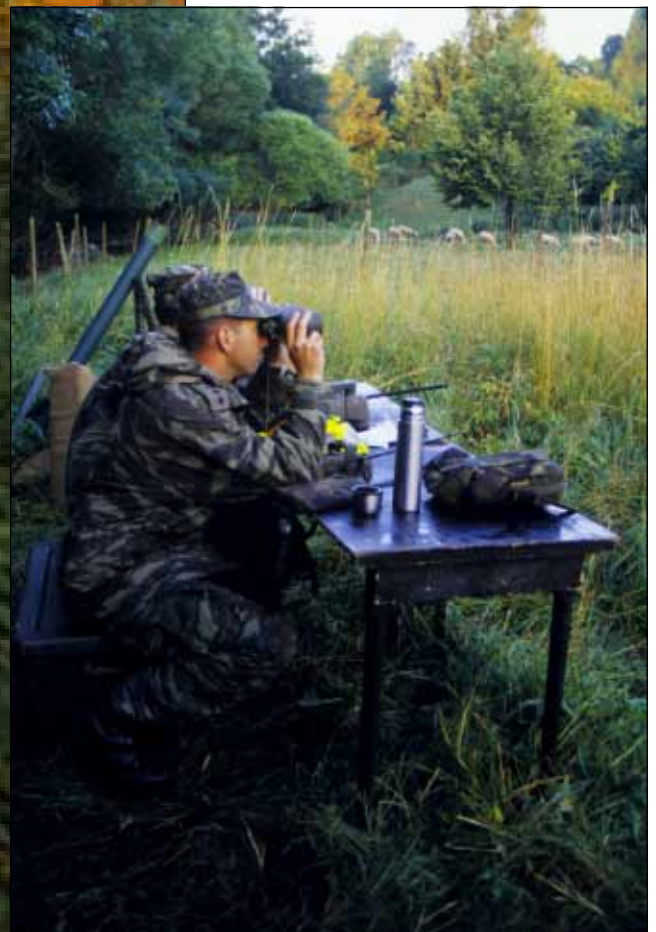


together in this part of the country — where the wood is typically wet from the winter snow — they'll get awfully cold," he said. "We teach them that they should always have something with them to start a fire, like a magnesium block. And the trick to keep a fire going is to collect three times more wood than you think you'll need."

An instructor checks on the "isolated" soldiers once or twice a day to make sure they're OK.

The isolation period simulates what will happen to the soldier if he's separated from his unit while on patrol, and teaches him the skills he'll need to reconnect with his unit.

Soldiers today are good at navigating with the Global Positioning System, but not with standard navigation tools, the Norwegian officer said. The course requires them to navigate with self-made instruments, use terrain to their benefit, obtain food and water, and prepare the food so it'll remain fresh longer.



**(Main photo)** A student in the Advanced Patrol Division moves out.

**(Right)** Course instructors — like these in the Sharpshooter's Course — collectively represent nine nations.

Much of the course is intended to boost self-confidence, he added. "It teaches soldiers they can survive without Gore-Tex, GPS or insulated underwear."

A five-day, 100-kilometer survival movement is also part of the course. Students are required to navigate to given checkpoints. Every 24 hours an instructor checks on their progress.

For some soldiers the course is part of their SF qualification course; if they fail it, they fail their country's SF requirement, said LTC Edward McHale, commander of the center's International Wing.

"In the past, the success rate for this course was only 25 percent," said Ninkovich. "Now it's up to 66 percent, largely because we place more emphasis on not quitting."

## Sharpshooters

Elsewhere in the Heuberg Training Area, about 25 kilometers from Pfullendorf, a group of special operations soldiers spent a recent early morning in the crisp autumn air, under a bright sun, where grazing sheep and an occasional hawk were the only other noticeable living creatures.

After stealing swiftly over a winding path and up over fields of tall grass, the men infiltrated a hilly wooded area. They "stalked" in to "put eyes on" a target — a simulated mortar site — then dug into their "hide" positions in the wood line and reported back on what they had seen.

The soldiers were from the Army's Company E, 165th Military Intelligence Battalion, a long-range surveillance unit from Darmstadt, Germany; Southern European Task Force in Vicenza, Italy; and the Combat Maneuver Training Center in Hohenfels, Germany. The group also included soldiers from Spain, Greece and Norway.



**The movement and concealment techniques learned by special forces soldiers from the United States and other nations could save their lives in future operations.**

Instructors scoured the fields, evaluating the soldiers on their ability to conceal themselves and locate and eliminate targets by estimating distance-to-target without any high-tech gear. Each time a student fired at a target, he risked compromising his position. But not "killing" the target was not an option.

The Sharpshooter Course includes three intense weeks of advanced shooting, camouflage and

concealment techniques, observation sketching and range-estimation classes.

As it neared its end, 15 of a recent class's original 20 students remained. Three had failed the required language test, one the PT test and another got sick, Ninkovich said.

## Patrol Medical Course

SFC Daniel Gay said the Patrol Medical Course is one of the most sought-after courses, providing students with three weeks of basic life support, advanced trauma life support and primary survey procedures, the same techniques emergency-room doctors use.

The course, headed by doctors from Italy and Greece, and a registered nurse and medical officer from Norway, is for soldiers who are not medics, said Gay, who is NCOIC of the Patrol Medical Division.

Keeping class size small — the maximum number of students is 24 — allows one instructor to focus on teaching four to six students, Gay said. It's short, but it's intense, so much so that tutors are on duty every night.

"There are more than 100 chemicals in the body," said MSG Dennis

**Course instructors in the intensive Patrol Medical Course demonstrate the procedures that should be performed in order to care for a "wounded" soldier on the battlefield.**

Dolan, the center's regimental sergeant major. "When I teach the cardiovascular system, I might ask a student: 'What are the two elements that initiate the sodium ion pump? What's the difference between systematic and pulmonary circulation?' And, 'What's a complete blood count?'"

Students use pig tissue to learn suturing skills and the lungs from dead pigs to respond to chest wounds that would temporarily cause the lungs to collapse, Dolan said.

"We teach them how to use morphine and epinephrine, and all the ways to secure an airway with an endotracheal tube," Gay added.

In classroom labs, students hone their skills on mannequins that have movable parts, "blood vessels" and "organs" to simulate everything from loss of consciousness or symptoms of a blocked airway to severe blood loss caused by wounds to a vein or artery.

A three-day field exercise culminates hours of classroom and individual study on the physiology of the







**ISTC courses sharpen the individual skills that contribute to the success of a special forces team, such as the one shown here dealing with a challenging obstacle.**

human body, pharmacology and medical procedures.

The field problem exposes students to all the noise, confusion and stress of the battlefield as they complete tasks such as evaluating a casualty, stabilizing his condition and treating his wounds, starting an intravenous injection and quickly calling for medevac.

It's one of seven practical trauma scenarios students must successfully complete to graduate from the course, said Gay.

## Combat Arms Recognition Courses

"During the Cold War, the Combat Arms Recognition Course was the one soldiers took to identify the second echelon," said Dolan. "In fact, when the school was founded in 1979 by the British, Belgians and Germans, it was funded specifically for this course."

In two weeks, students learn to identify 230 different pieces of "frontline equipment" from various, major weapon-producing countries. Today, it's the equipment used largely in peacekeeping operations.

Students also learn to identify other nations' military uniforms, hand-held weapons and weapon system capabilities, Dolan said.

A three-week Specialist Recognition Course teaches students about 330 pieces of military equipment from around the world and covers command-and-control and communication and electronic equipment, Dolan said. Students also learn to translate the Cyrillic alphabet, used by countries of the former Yugoslavia, into the Latin alphabet, to simplify word recognition.

Instructors use a large computer screen and multi-image software to project nine images on a wall at once. This allows students to view a vehicle

or piece of equipment from various angles. Bulletized information beside each illustration, when selected, provides additional details. And video clips show students what the equipment looks like in action.

Enemy forces often construct decoys to confuse their foes, so students are also exposed to "what we call 'fake systems,'" said course OIC CPT Eruc Erkan, of the Turkish special forces.

"They might encounter, for example, what looks like a Scud missile launcher," Erkan said. "We show them images that have additional wheels, or garden hoses attached somewhere to the system."

And because what soldiers see in a real operation might well be through night-vision goggles, instructors also use available thermal images or create them in the computer, Dolan said.

A puzzle-like display shows bits and pieces of systems, "to get students to focus on recognizable features, rather than on an entire image," Dolan said. That's important, considering students in the two-week course are shown some 40,000 images. Those in the three-week course view some 60,000.

More accurate recognition of equipment used by allies will reduce "blue-on-blue," or "fratricide," incidents, Dolan said.

The classroom itself boasts learning tools that include a train terrain board on which military vehicles travel by railcars around the track and under tunnels. The intent is to heighten students' awareness of tactical activities that could provide valuable intelligence information to commanders.

"If you know what's being loaded, you know what's coming forward," said Adc. Peter Capyo, a Belgian instructor equivalent to a U.S. sergeant major.

Additional training aids include larger-scale models of munitions and



*In two weeks, students learn to identify 230 different pieces of "frontline equipment" from various, major weapon-producing countries.*

equipment, and CDs and magazines from around the world.

"Soldiers are first trained for combat," Erkan said. "This is the next most important thing they learn, because a soldier is always a better asset if he can recognize and report back on enemy soldiers and equipment."

The course is open to all soldiers, said Hfw. Frank Bulow, a German soldier equivalent to the U.S. rank of sergeant first class.

"This is important for every soldier," he said. "Commanders can get reports from all types of units, from cooks to aviators."

"I know from the German and American armies that their soldiers' recognition skills are weak," said Capyo. "It proved to be a problem for coalition forces during the Gulf War, where 70 percent of losses were blue-on-blue."

"S-2s and G-2s — the people on the other end of the radio — need to be familiar with other nations' military equipment and uniforms, too, to understand what the soldier who's

calling in a report is talking about," Capyo said. "If a commander doesn't get correct information, he'll deploy troops based on a mistake."

## Patrol Courses

The Patrol Division runs three courses: the Patrol Commander's Course, Advanced Patrol Course and Close-Quarter Battle Course. They are four, three and two weeks in duration, respectively, said division OIC Belgian Capt. Wim Denolf.

The commander's course focuses on planning a mission. "We spend about half of the course in an isolated area, planning missions," said Denolf. The course covers plans for reconnaissance, insertion, actions on the objective, extraction and escape.

The advanced course focuses on execution of direct-action missions by a team, as for raids and ambushes, and includes sabotage and demolition



**A model railroad is among the many training aids used by instructors in ISTC's highly regarded Combat Arms Recognition Course.**

training. In addition to tracking techniques, students also learn counter-tracking, making false tracks and hiding tracks in the snow, as examples, to evade the OPFOR and dog teams that search for the patrols, Denolf said.

"We always patrol at night. During the day we lie waiting with our eyes on the target. How far we travel depends on the mission," said Denolf, a member of the Belgian Paracommando Brigade. "We have a rule: 'Good patrolling means patrolling about one kilometer per hour. If there's eight hours of darkness, we might infiltrate eight kilometers.'"

In the Close Quarter Battle Course, instructors teach soldiers from special operations and long-range reconnaissance patrol units quick-reaction shooting in a wooded environment, and how to kill or incapacitate an enemy in close-combat using hands, ropes or knives. They also learn how to transport prisoners.

ISTC's scope is greater still. With the center's recent transfer from British to U.S. control, plus the interest shown by other NATO-member nations in sending their soldiers for training, and the proposed changes and additions to the center's curriculum, ISTC remains a leader in training NATO's elite multinational forces in Europe. □



**To avoid "capture," this U.S. soldier-student must keep low and crawl quietly but quickly to a nearby treeline without being seen by the pursuing "enemy."**